



Dental Health Certificates Advance Profession's Mission

NYSDF personnel respond to questions about implementation of children's oral health initiative.

PASSAGE OF the landmark dental health certificates law (Chapter 281, NYS Education Law) in 2007 requires that school districts request a dental health certificate from children in K, 2nd, 4th, 7th and 10th grades. This legislation is an important achievement of the New York State Dental Association and advances its goal of improving the oral health of all New York State residents. Dental professionals know that early detection, prevention and treatment of oral disease are keys to achieving dental health in children. Furthermore, while it is not clear that treating oral disease will improve specific health problems, we do know that oral health is important to the overall well-being of children and adults.

The New York State Dental Foundation will assist NYSDA in implementing dental health certificates. NYSDF Executive Director Laura Leon and Milton L Lawney, D.D.S., public advocacy coordinator for the NYSDF, were asked to respond to questions, to inform dentists regarding dental health certificates.

The NYSDJ: What does the law require?

Ms. Leon: The law requires that school districts request that students entering grades K, 2, 4, 7 and 10 present a dental health certificate. It also mandates that schools provide a list of dentists who offer free or reduced-fee assessments for children who do not have insurance, Medicaid or who are otherwise unable to afford such assessments.

The NYSDJ: Why is this law important?

Dr. Lawney: Dental professionals know that early prevention, detection and treatment (when necessary) are important to a

child's dental health. The certificate program will improve access to oral health care for children.

It will aid also in fulfilling the objectives of the "New York State Oral Health Plan" (www.health.state.ny.us/prevention/dental/) and the Department of Health and Human Services "Healthy People 2010" initiative (www.healthypeople.gov). Dentists should review and become familiar with these documents because they set the future path for oral health care in New York State.

The NYSDJ: What is the role of the component dental societies?

Ms. Leon: All school districts are served by the local community of dentists. Therefore, it is important that our dental components are intimately involved in the implementation of the certificate program. Support and guidance will be provided by the Dental Foundation and Dr. Lawney. We anticipate that once the program is established and protocols are put in place, it can be maintained easily.

The component will communicate with its members and the public about the new law. It is also expected to forge partnerships with local school districts to ensure that children will have access to dental assessments.

The law requires that the departments of Health and Education give school districts a list of dentists who will provide free or reduced-fee dental assessments. The component, in turn, will assist the foundation in locating already established dental health access programs in the surrounding communities, such as providers who accept Medicaid or who currently offer free or reduced-fee dental services to eligible patients.

The NYSDJ: What is the role of the dentist?

Dr. Lawney: The dental profession exists to provide the best oral health care to the public. The certificate program will ensure that children will be assessed repeatedly throughout their school years. The law seeks to have dentists offer free or reduced-fee assessments for children who are unable to afford such assessments on their own.

The dentist should provide an office protocol for how staff will respond when a parent or guardian calls the office citing the dental health certificate. The foundation and components will assist dentists in developing a protocol.

As always, the dental office should educate parents and guardians about the importance of continuing oral health care, including regular visits to the dentist for children. For children who are patients of record, routine recall visits will fulfill the certificate requirement. However, a simple form, which is currently under development by relevant state agencies, will be required and will need to be filled out by the dentist and parent or guardian, and returned to the school.

The NYSDJ: What are the next steps?

Ms. Leon: The NYSDF is compiling a list of dentists who are willing to offer dental assessments for school-aged children for free or at a reduced fee. The NYSDF is also working to identify dentists, established groups and organizations throughout the state that currently offer free or reduced-fee dental services for children.

Regulations are being implemented now and forms and paper-

work are being developed by the appropriate state agencies, with input from NYSDA and NYSDF, to start the certificate program. What this means is, even though we have a law that makes school dental health certificates a reality, it cannot be implemented until the regulations and paperwork that make it work are finalized by the state. It is anticipated the regulations will be in effect by the end of the summer.

The NYSDJ: Where can dentists obtain information about the certificate program? And where can a dentist apply to offer free or reduced-fee assessments or to identify dentists, groups or organizations that currently offer free or reduced-fee dentistry to eligible children?

Dr. Lawney: Further information will be forthcoming as it is available. Regular updates and appropriate forms will be available on the foundation's Web site at www.nysdentalfoundation.org.

The NYSDF will be working with interested parties to share information regarding this important program. It is estimated that 51 million school hours per year are lost in the U.S. because of dental-related illness. It is also known that poor oral health has been related to decreased school performance, poor social relationships and less success later in life. We are hopeful that through the certificate program, and with the continued assistance and commitment to prevention of the dental community, we can address these issues. ■

